

ON TOP OF MOUNT WASHINGTON, N.H.

Cold Enough for You?

By PETER MANDEL
Special to The Washington Post

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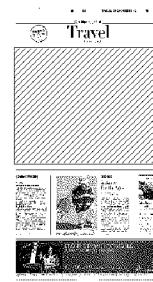
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See OBSERVATORY, P6, Col. 1

April 1934 it clocked a 231-mph wind, the strongest ever recorded on Earth. Sign up for one of its winter excursions and you get to stagger around in gusts, spend a night in a bunkhouse and watch the weather instruments go wild.



The real job of the nonprofit Mount Washington Observatory is to make hourly weather observations at the summit and to do environmental research. In a typical summer, the mountain has a quarter-million visitors, and it's easy to get up to the observatory from May to October. Tourists ride on the Mount Washington cog railway or motor up the auto road (you've seen the "This Car Climbed. . . ." bumper stickers). But once the snow hits, only a few hundred make it to the top. That's where the observatory's winter day trips and its overnight program come in: Overnights cost \$459 plus a membership fee for joining the observatory, and each features an expert instructor with an environmental lecture



theme. A snow tractor takes you up and back down, and you sack out in the observatory bunk room.

The first overnight with space available is in mid-January. The Mount Washington car road and cog train are closed because of snow from October to May, so we'll be hauled to the top in the back of a snow cat.

"Since we cannot count on 100% reliable transportation," reads the flier mailed to me in advance, "you must be in good physical condition so that you can hike to safety . . . in rugged weather conditions with energy-sapping cold, chilling and buffeting winds, and through deep drifted snow." I am ready.

But then there's the detailed list of gear, a spreadsheet that falls out of the same envelope. What's an ice ax? Am I going to be chopping there? Sports Authority is out of the required antifog solution to apply to my ski goggles. I end up packing my flannel-lined jeans instead of the suggested wind pants, and I pick up a pair of gloves at a CVS because I don't have time to shop for "windproof mitten shells."



It's 7 degrees at the bottom of the mountain on the morning of our ascent. The tips of my fingers are, even here, beginning to scream. Shaking people's windproof mittens, I find out I've booked myself on "A Special Edu-Trip for New Hampshire Science Teachers." I am not a teacher, and I live in Rhode Island. But it looks like a veteran group: There are seven of us, plus a group leader and two assistants. Maybe I can learn.

During the hour-long lurching climb inside the snow cat, we hand around a laminated map of the route to the top. We're tipping and heeling around tricky curves with names such as "Gravel Pit," "Tank Farm" and "Air Force." No wildlife so far. But, we're told, the summit sometimes has ravens, foxes and weasels. One time, someone thought he saw a moose.

At about 4,000 feet, one of the teachers brings out a bag of potato chips. Due to the altitude, it's puffed up to basketball size. Jim Nacchia, a teacher in a high-security juvenile detention facility in Wilmington, Del., looks as if he wants to pop it. He's got an evil gleam in his eye. I ask him why he's on the trip. Would his students

want to come?

"My kids don't leave the building," corrects Nacchia. "My job is to bring the outside to them."

At that exact moment the snow cat smacks something in its path. We're thrown violently forward, then back. The cabin's rear window is smashed. Doors fly open. Duffel bags eject into the snow.

"Everyone okay?" asks trip leader Steve Roberts. Everyone is. In fact, the science teachers are excited about the forces of physics we've just felt. Someone holds up the dirigible bag of chips: It's intact.

At the summit, we get a tour of the observatory building. There's a wind-swept, lighthouse-like tower. There's a state park office. And there's a U.S. Post Office with a sign stuck to its window: "Closed til June, 2008." The highest peak in New England, Mount Washington has its own Zip code: 03589.

The observatory's weather room, a mass of quivering instruments and screens, looks like the sick bay on "Star Trek." The patients monitored here are storms, violent winds and pathological snow.



The bunk rooms where we'll sleep resemble a fire station. There are castoff couches and chairs, a volunteer cook stirring chili in a pot and a panel alarm on the wall. The observatory's mascot cat, Marty, sleeps atop a pair of duck boots. All we need is the pole.

There's a well-equipped bathroom, but, we're told, the water supply is limited up here. "I hope they told you this," Roberts says, "but there are rules about toilet flushing. And we can't allow you to take showers." Great.

It's time to don our insulating airproof gear. Roberts pushes open the observatory door. No blizzard. But a slap of wind. And sun mirrored on everything, making you frown or grin.

"What an amazing day," Nacchia says. I disagree. The weather right now won't threaten any records. The winds are at maybe 40 mph. You can get that anywhere. But my fingers counter with a CVS-glove report: No question it's cold. Single digits — and that's despite the sun. The top of Mount Washington is a kitchen free-

er that needs defrosting. All of its antennas and outbuildings wear a furry coat, a wrap that seems woolier than wool. It's horizontal ice. I start chipping at it, snapping chunks and pinpricks and points.

"Rime ice," says Ashley Moore, a teacher from Andover, N.H. "It's basically frozen clouds."

I'd like to collect this stuff and take some home. But it's time to go back inside. The wind is starting to toss snow around. And Roberts is pointing to something: gray clouds just beginning to shadow the clean view of the White Mountains.

After a strange-tasting soup for lunch (the chef brags that he has used up two bags of vegetables that have been taking up space in the fridge), we're back into our gear and outside.

A couple of the teachers have shoveled a snow cave into a mammoth drift, and we take turns getting down on hands and knees and crawling in. I'm told that this is a good thing to do if a blizzard traps you during a hike. But it's dark and spooky inside — like an amusement park tunnel ride. The ceiling is long and low, and I crawl carefully, afraid that I'll bump or brush it and cause the snow to collapse.

Someone has sighted a fox outside, and I use that as an excuse to slither out. The sky is going gray, and flurries are swirling, but I can see it: reddish fur, a puffy tail, two triangle ears. The fox looks tired. Is it asleep? It's squinting. It swivels its head, spots us and springs out of view.

Back inside we cluster around so Roberts, a science teacher himself, can show us how to make a cloud appear in an empty plastic bottle. It has something to do with pressure. I try squeezing my bottle as instructed but can only get a wisp of fog. "What subject do you teach?" Roberts asks skeptically. I change the subject.

After eating dinner and before bunking down, we watch some weather films and hear a lecture on why Mount Washington is world-class windy and cold. It's related to its strategic spot at the intersection of three big storm tracks. Someone asks if things have been milder here recently because of global warming. The word "milder" gets some snickers. Observatory stat sheets show that some of the monthly record-low temperatures up here have occurred pretty recently

(the April low was in 1995, the July low in 2001). For worst-case temperatures and snowfall, it seems to have been a seesaw since the observatory started keeping records in 1933. I'd like to know more, but the inside warmth is making me drowsy, and I begin to doze.

I am looking forward to the bunk beds, because I haven't slept in one since I was a kid at camp. I climb the ladder and slide in. It's cold in the bunk room, and I can hear a whistling sound. Must be the wind.

It grows to a crescendo, tapers off, then builds again and again to an express-train roar. Then I realize the wind noises are coming from inside:

It's my bunkmates, snoring.

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It's morning. Marty the cat makes sure I'm up by launching himself into my middle bunk. I go straight for the window. There is nothing to see. Nothing but a coating of saltlike granules and the sound of something peppering the glass.

Whiteout.

I give a whoop. The instrument screen on the wall shows wind gusts at 82 mph. Blowing, drifting snow.

Some of the science teachers are drinking cocoa and talking about what life might be like if you lived in New Mexico or Arizona. "The heck with that," someone says. "Let's go."

We yank on our boots, coats and goggles, then clang up metal stairs and wrestle with the door that leads outside to the deck and tower. A wind gauge is muttering and spinning.

The storm strikes like a punch. I feel it square on the nose. My scarf is whipped away. It coils on the balcony and is gone, snaking into whiteness. Now I'm exposed to whatever the wind can throw, and it picks glass chips. Tiny, diamond pieces. I try to yell. There's glass on my lips. It's too sharp to be snow.

My flannel-lined jeans are drenched. The CVS gloves are collecting slush inside. I strip them off. I try sticking fingers of one hand into the other palm. I try to move and turn away from the wind, but I lose my footing and bang into the observatory wall.

I wish I had some anti-fog solution. An ice ax. Someone plants a foot and

wrenches the door open. We grab the frame, we duck, we slide, we're home.

It's when I'm on the staircase, looking down, that I see it. Something spiky and white on my jacket. More furry than Marty.

It's a summit badge: rime ice.

There's only a patch, and it is starting to melt. But when I break the tip of it off and hold it up, it looks delicate, valuable, fine.

Winter does have some secrets, I think. I can't take them home. But I can remember.

And while it lasts, this one is mine.

Peter Mandel last wrote for Travel on kids' secret travel tips.

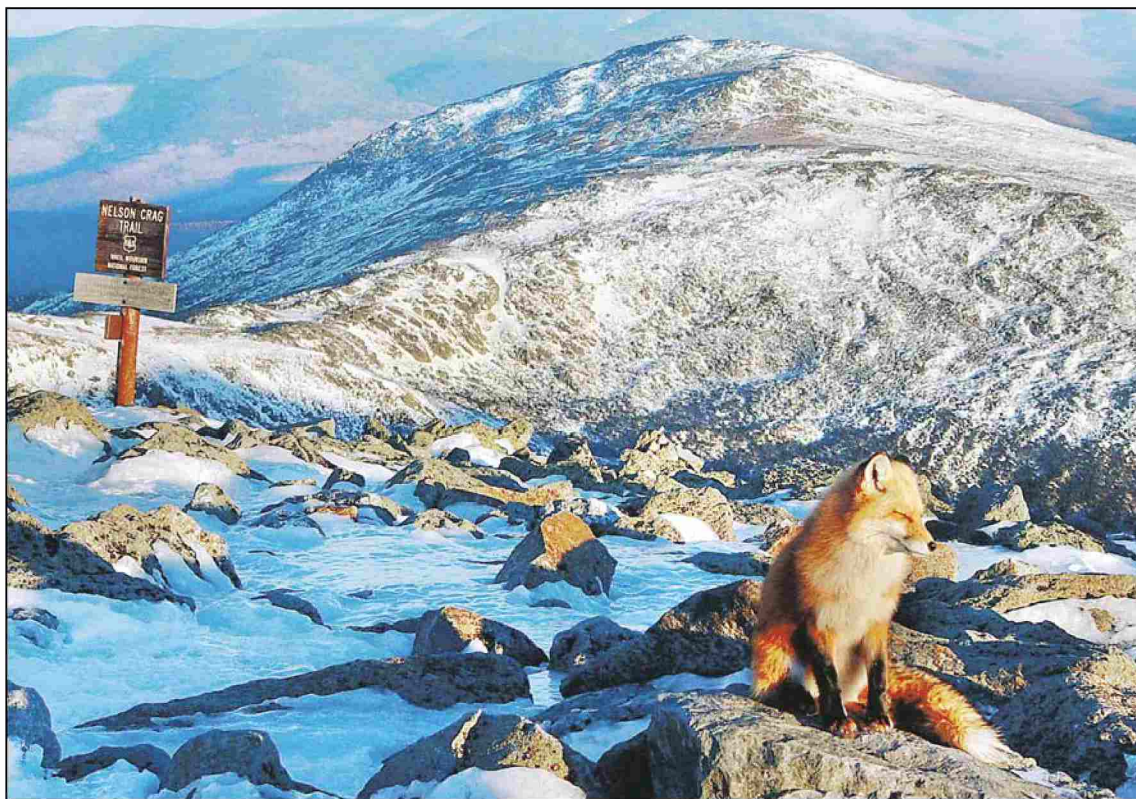
ONLINE DISCUSSION



Peter Mandel will be online Monday at 2 p.m. during the Travel section's weekly chat at www.washingtonpost.com.



BY GENE THORP — THE WASHINGTON POST



Foxes are among the few animals to frequent the area during the winter.



PHOTOS FROM MOUNT WASHINGTON OBSERVATORY

On the highest peak in New England, the Mount Washington Observatory hosts winter excursions for the hardy. Only a few hundred make the trip to the icy top from October to April.



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Trip leader Steve Roberts at New Hampshire's Mount Washington Observatory, home of "the world's worst weather," where rime ice clings to exposed surfaces, winds whip and temperatures can fall to 40 below. Overnights sell out fast.

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